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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

CONSCIOUSNESS—WHERE IS IT?¹

I SUPPOSE that even a behaviorist will recognize a difference between having a toothache and seeing (or, perhaps, hearing) your neighbor have a toothache. This difference I shall call the difference between the point of view of the agent—or, it may be, the patient—and the point of view of the observer. And in attempting to show where consciousness may be found, I shall take as my point of departure the agent's point of view rather than the observer's. Not, perhaps, because consciousness may not be defined and distinguished by an observer, but because it can not be distinguished by an observer unless he is also an agent.

This is my objection to the method of distinguishing consciousness by reference to the specific mode of response belonging to creatures having a nervous system. What is this specific mode of response, and how does it differ from the responses of waterfalls and steam-engines? It seems that those who resolve consciousness into a specific response are unable to specify the response; and I believe that they could not distinguish conscious from unconscious responses without presupposing just that "inner" point of view which they seek to define away. I can imagine a similar problem. Suppose that we are asked to explain the difference between written language and other marks that may be made upon paper. The answer may be that language is made up of the specific marks, or relations of marks, that have meaning. But, of course, any marks whatever may have meaning—if only we have found the point of view of the person to whom they are significant. There is no specific grouping of marks necessarily peculiar to language. Neither, I venture to say, is there any specific form of reaction peculiar to a nervous system. The sounds uttered by the creature with the nervous system may be English, Chinese, or mere gibberish. To one who already attaches meaning to them, they indicate consciousness; and to him they are also specific. To any one else they are not even specific. Gibberish, for example, is never specific.

¹ Read at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Columbia University, December, 1916.

Accordingly, in seeking an answer to the question, Consciousness—where is it? I have in mind, at the outset, at least, not so much my neighbor's consciousness as my own. Where, in the world of my experience, do I find what I call my consciousness? First I shall reply, Not in any so-called "mental states," as distinguished from corresponding physical things—not in any specifically "mental" images, sensations, impressions, or presentations. That is to say, I agree with those who hold that when we perceive a chair, what we have before us is not a perception of a chair, but a chair. And I should say the same thing of memory of the past. When I remember what happened last Christmas, I do not have a "mental image" of last Christmas, by means of which I arrive at the real events of last Christmas; on the contrary, I am living in last Christmas, in the same way as I am living in to-day. In other words, I find in my experience no series of "inner experiences," such as Kant assumes, which are distinct from a parallel series of "outer experiences." My perception of things is not a perception of perceptions, but a perception of things.

And if I do not find my consciousness in any such mental states as "perceptions" or "presentations," neither do I find it in any other mental states, called feelings or emotions. Those who fail to find their consciousness in perceptions may take up as a second line of defense the position that, at any rate, in their emotions they have something peculiarly and exclusively mental. If they have no cognitive states which are numerically distinct from the object known, at least they have other mental states to which there is no corresponding object whatever. It seems to me, however, that after James's theory of emotion this distinction is no longer tenable. James has shown, I should say, that emotion, whatever else it may be, is a consciousness of bodily movement. Now, the consciousness of bodily movement is by no means the same as unconscious bodily movement—just as the perception of a chair is a different fact from the unperceived existence of a chair. But just as the perception of the chair is not to be found in a state numerically distinct from the object chair, neither is the emotion to be found in any state numerically distinct from the bodily movement of which it is the consciousness. The point of the matter is that all consciousness is in varying degree—cognition more clearly and emotion less clearly—consciousness of an object. If we are seeking for our realities in clearly marked things, numerically distinct one from another, we are likely to find objects before we find consciousness. Indeed, as regards the prior immediacy of mental states, it strikes me always as an interesting reflection that, although everyone seems to know what we mean by a chair, no one seems to know what is meant by an idea of a chair.

Where in the world, then, is consciousness? I state the question thus, because I wish to ask in reply, Where in the world is it not? When I turn once more to the familiar chair and attempt to describe it, the first thing that I find is that it has legs, arms, back, and seat—very human attributes. And if I try again, resolved now to describe the chair in terms wholly impersonal—well, I seem to find no terms which, in the last analysis, are really impersonal. If, for example, I discard the word “legs” for “uprights,” I am reminded that things are upright or the reverse only in relation to the position of the human body. In brief, I can frame no description of the chair without making it to be an object qualified by the fact that it is humanly known. This means that I find consciousness in the chair.

This is, perhaps, to repeat the more or less familiar doctrine that consciousness of the chair is to be found in the meaning of the chair. The use of the term “meaning” raises, however, an important question. Does the meaning of the chair leave the chair unaltered? Those who define consciousness as a relation, and meaning as a relation—the relation, namely, between an object and a living organism—insist also that all relations are external: consciousness of the chair leaves the chair unaltered. Now, as a matter of fact and experience, it is only for the observer—and for him only relatively—that the chair remains unaltered; when I explain the working of an automobile or of a typewriter to a supposedly uninformed neighbor the object is constantly changing for him while it remains nearly the same for me. It is thus an external observer’s point of view that is quietly presupposed in the doctrine of external relations and in the definition of consciousness as a relation—as if, somehow, the facts of our world, which each of us perceives for himself, could only be described in the way that they appear to other persons; or, perhaps, to no real person whatever. And it is this point of view which makes consciousness as a relation seem unrecognizable as consciousness. If consciousness is nothing but a casual relation between an object and a living organism, then surely the neo-realists are right in saying that consciousness is not more important than other relations. But it seems to me that we must then go further and ask why the term “consciousness” was ever invented, and why this relation is worth any consideration whatever.

What I would point out, then, is that, from the point of view of the person who is conscious of an object, the meaning of an object is not extrinsic, or additional to, or separable from, the object itself. The chair as perceived is not independent of the meaning of the chair. The chair does not remain the same, for the same person or for different persons, while the meaning changes. The structural detail of the chair is not a constant fact while our idea of its function varies. Nor,

again, is the perceived chair an entity; the meaning, however, a non-entity. Whatever an entity may be, the meaning of the chair is as much or as little of an entity as the perceived chair; for what we perceive varies strictly with the meaning we are able to assign to it.

I find it difficult to illustrate this point forcibly in the case of the chair, just because, in civilized life, the chair is a universally familiar object, which each of us, so far as memory extends, has always known, and the meaning or function of which has remained virtually constant. To measure our consciousness of the chair we should have to compare what we ourselves see in a chair with what is seen by a primitive man who is confronted with a chair for the first time; let it be remembered that to an uncivilized person the function of this piece of furniture is by no means necessarily obvious. We may, however, compare the chair as seen by a mechanically intelligent person with the chair as seen by one, perhaps of the opposite sex, who has no mechanical interest. Suppose I ask such a person how the back of a given chair is supported against the strain imposed by the back of the sitter—obviously, this is one of the chief problems in the designing of a chair. Is the back of the chair of one piece with the back-legs? Or is it a separate piece, and braced? Or is it of one piece and also braced? These, of course, are matters of perception; yet I think you will agree that these questions will elicit various answers, and that the answers will vary according to the ideas possessed by the respondent of the function of the parts in question.

Suppose, however, we take an object which each of us remembers having learned to know. I began to use a typewriter, say, five years ago. I can not now remember how the typewriter looked to me then. But if after the first presentation I had been asked to draw from memory a detailed picture of the typewriter, I am certain that, beyond the general shape of the machine, I should have been able to give you little more than the keyboard and the platen, or roller. My idea of a typewriter was thus little more than an impression of a vague mass of mechanism, of a certain shape, which served the purpose of writing. My picture of a typewriter to-day, though still more or less impressionistic, would be obviously much richer in detail. This difference represents, then, not merely a difference in "knowledge about" the typewriter—to make use of James's distinction—but at the same time a difference in "acquaintance with" the typewriter; it is a difference of perception. Indeed, one way of stating my point is to say simply that acquaintance with an object can not be independent of knowledge about it. Nor can knowledge about be independent of acquaintance with. For, while my perception of the typewriter has developed in the multiplication and in the coordination of details, my conception of its function has similarly developed.

In noting one by one the several devices—for example, for beginning a new line, for changing from lower to upper case, or for shifting the carriage so that letters shall not overlap—I have come to realize more clearly just what a writing machine has to do.

And indeed it seems that, for the person who is learning to know an object, meaning and perception, structure and function, *must* go together. Here, for example, is a certain plug at one end of the carriage which, it turns out, regulates the space between the lines. Now, I may contemplate this plug vaguely, or I may perceive it exactly. But I can not perceive it exactly without noting its connections and its precise setting; and in a perfectly clear perception of the setting, the function is *ipso facto* revealed.

The chairs and the typewriters are things of human use, and we know that a meaning has been put into them. Our consciousness is found, however, in the meaning that they have for us, as percipient subjects; and therefore the same analysis applies not less—or perhaps I should say, only less—to the objects of nature, for example, the mountains and the trees. The distinction of mountain and valley, however correspondent to outer fact, holds its place in our consciousness by virtue of the fact that, given our human powers of locomotion, the valleys are the great arteries of culture and communication. From the point of view of civilization the distinction of mountain and valley is vital. To the geologist it is relatively insignificant—a mere detail in the crumpling of the earth's crust. To the astronomer it counts for nearly nothing, except as the mountain furnishes a convenient site for an observatory. Apart from this consideration, an astronomer, really absorbed in his subject, might be supposed to be as imperceptive to the distinction of mountain and valley as Hegel is said to have been to the Battle of Jena.

And the trees. This illustration, as it happens, suggests to me another way of putting the matter. We can not disentangle our consciousness from the object so as to view it alone; neither can we disentangle the object from our consciousness. For suppose we ask what is the real tree, as viewed by impersonal science. Now, the aim of impersonal science is to get its object wholly disentangled from the subject, wholly divested of qualities that imply a human interpretation. If, then, we regard the tree as an organic unity which expresses a certain arboreal principle of life, it seems that we have not yet reached the impersonal view—certainly, if we judge by the general hostility of biological scientists towards vitalistic theories and their steady search for a mechanical explanation of life. But if we treat the tree as a mechanism, we seem driven in the end to define it as a collection of atoms. And then we face the question, What marks off the collection? In human experience the tree stands alone, in an

empty field; for impersonal science the same tree is only a part of a sea of atoms which includes the air as well as the tree. The atoms composing the tree are doubtless nearer together; and to us men this means collision and resistance when we try to walk through them. But imagine to yourself a physicist of divine insight, a physicist whose thought were so perfectly learned that with the vulgar he could not even speak. To him, it seems, the distinction of solid tree and empty air must be wholly insignificant. To him the tree and the air would be alike simply an expanse of atoms; and, having no scientific reason for distinguishing the specific differences of condensation and rarefaction, he could not even see that the atoms were differently grouped. In brief the tree must be to him, at most, what the man in the moon is to us—merely a convenient fiction; and if we are to speak of entities, then a nonentity, or nothing.

But I shall not myself say that the tree is nothing; or that it is nothing but consciousness. If consciousness is to be distinguished from the object, the object must be no less distinguished from consciousness; all that I say is that, from the point of view of the agent, they are not separable. If we look for the object in some separable, impersonal, non-conscious, non-human, and non-significant element, or "entity," in our experience, we shall never find it.

This brings me, however, to a general statement of my thesis. Hitherto I have kept in mind the point of view of the agent; and perhaps I have invited the objection that the existence of this point of view—or, for the matter of that, the existence of any points of view—is just the point in question. Very well, then: having obtained the facts which the point of view has to offer, we may now, if we like, pour the contents of all points of view into a loosely general world of fact and note simply a broad outstanding distinction. Everything in the world, we may say, undergoes two sorts of changes. (1) On the one hand, it suffers the changes that I have noted in my typewriter; that is to say, it passes from a thing of indefinite parts, or aspects, incoherently related, to a thing of relatively definite parts, coherently related. These changes it undergoes when brought into relation with some particular percipient agent—they represent the agent's view. (2) But on the other hand, it undergoes changes which seem to be independent of its relation to a particular agent. The real typewriter, as we call it, was never vague, never indefinite, and never incoherent; as an objective fact it is at any moment simply what it is; neither indefinitely nor incoherently so, nor yet, indeed (if our description is to be strictly objective), definitely or coherently. The changes which the real typewriter has undergone are somewhat as follows: the frame has lost some of its varnish; the parts are worn—which means that they now weigh less; and they have accumulated

dirt and rust. Such changes are irrelevant to changes in definiteness and coherence. Now, the series of changes indicated under (1) is consciousness. Viewing them as items in a general world of fact, and ignoring the point of view in which they are given, we shall have to say that these are changes in the typewriter quite as much as the changes of wear and tear; for apart from the typewriter they do not occur. If, then, we are to locate consciousness in a world of general fact, we must say that in these changes of the thing known we find our consciousness.

To characterize this conscious side of things I might perhaps use the word "meaning." But this word, as I have suggested, fails, as it is now used, to suggest with sufficient clearness that meanings, so far as they are meaningful, are personal; or that they are also bound up with changes in the object. The term "control" I reject as insufficient, because it seems to me to suggest, from the standpoint of a biological pragmatism, that consciousness is not for itself, but for something else; or that consciousness is exclusively forward-looking. From the standpoint of keeping the body alive, it may be that the future alone is relevant and real; but from the standpoint of the conscious realization of life, the past may be even more real than the future.

It seems to me that the peculiarity of the conscious side of things is best expressed in concrete terms by the words "familiarity" and "intelligibility" and by the contrast suggested by their opposites, "strangeness" and "opacity." I add familiarity to intelligibility because the intelligibility that I have in mind is personal intelligibility. Everything in our world has a certain degree of familiarity and intelligibility. That which is wholly foreign and inscrutable lies beyond our ken; at the most it gives us a vague impression of "something there." On the other hand, everything has a certain strangeness and opacity; in everything we reach a point at which it ceases to be transparent and intelligible. In the familiarity and intelligibility of things we find our consciousness and ourselves; in their strangeness and opacity, the limitations of our consciousness and of ourselves.

I know of no more striking illustration of the presence or absence of consciousness than in the changes which come over a place which is now familiar, but which was once unfamiliar. On the first day of a four-months' stay at Stanford University several years ago a colleague invited me to walk in the surrounding country. I returned with a few memories of details, a general impression of loveliness, and a vague, and largely erroneous, conception of geographical relations. In the course of many walks afterwards I gradually arrived at a clearer picture and a more exact orientation. But I had always

difficulty in adjusting my clearer knowledge of details to the ideas formed on the first day. This is a common experience. After becoming familiar with a place—or with a person—we always wonder at our first impression. “It is not the same place.” And the point of the matter is that it is *not* the same place. The place has not merely “acquired an aspect of familiarity”—an aspect superimposed upon an otherwise unchanged content—but the place itself has changed. Yet all the while it has not, perhaps, “really” changed. The changes that go with familiarity mark the progress of consciousness.

To conclude, then—to the question, Where in the world is consciousness? I reply, Where in the world is it not? I have tried to show that consciousness is not “in the mind,” but in the world; but, on the other hand, that consciousness is really in the world, and everywhere in the world. So far as the world is familiar and intelligible, there we find our consciousness and ourselves; and what is absolutely unintelligible is not in our world. Consciousness is not a casual relation between supposedly impersonal things. It is not a mere “relation” between “entities” more substantive than itself. In speaking of consciousness as a series of changes observable in things I have been adapting myself to what seems to be now the conventional necessity of using phenomenalist language. But if I may use the realistic language which I prefer, I shall translate the series of changes into persons and say that persons are as real as anything else. In the familiarity and intelligibility of things I find myself; but I am myself no less substantive an entity, and no less of an immediate and original fact or phenomenon, than the things with which I am familiar.

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THE NATURE OF THE PSYCHICAL¹

IN undertaking to discuss the topic selected by the committee for this occasion I wish to take advantage of the enabling clause which states that “no restriction is placed upon the freedom of participants in the discussion to attack the general problem by any methods which seem to them suitable—provided only that they establish some definite connection between their contribution and the recent reflection of others upon the subject.” The “recent reflection of others” which I propose as my theme is the drift of neo-realistic speculation towards behavior as the key to the mystery of consciousness, and my special task will be an elaboration of the implications that seem to be contained in this tendency or point of view.

¹ Read at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Columbia University, December, 1916.